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## **‘FOR WE ARE ONE PEOPLE’.<sup>1</sup> RUSSO–UKRAINIAN WAR IN V. PUTIN’S RUSSIA’S OFFICIAL DISCOURSE**

I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible  
only in partnership with Russia.  
Our spiritual, human, and civilizational ties formed for centuries  
and have their origins in the same sources,  
they have been hardened by common trials, achievements,  
and victories. [...] Together we have always been  
and will be many times stronger and more successful.  
For we are one people.  
*Vladimir Putin*<sup>2</sup>

### **A b s t r a c t**

This paper focuses on the official discourse of V. Putin’s Russia regarding the Russo–Ukrainian war (2014–present). Its aim is to analyze recurring pro-Kremlin war narratives, identify the discursive strategies employed by Russian authorities, and extract the common topoi found within them. Additionally, it draws parallels between the narratives of World War II and the Russo–Ukrainian war. I propose that: a) V. Putin’s Russia functions as a memory authoritarian regime, recreating the Soviet memory regime regarding World War II and using memory on a global scale, and b) the Russo–Ukrainian war has significant potential to evolve into a new myth for Russian society.

**K e y w o r d s:** Russia, Vladimir Putin, Russia’s war discourse, Russo–Ukrainian war, World War II.

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Putin, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> (access: 31 July 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper was written in response to Russia's military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, which V. Putin justified as a mission to 'denazify' the Ukrainian state. In reality, the invasion was accompanied by extensive Russian propaganda that successfully bolstered public support for both the president<sup>3</sup> and the war.<sup>4</sup> Under V. Putin's leadership, Russia has employed various tools to reinforce citizens' loyalty and conduct both domestic and foreign policy. This includes the use of information and cyber threats, such as fake social media accounts and websites impersonating established news organizations and public authorities. Moreover, the Kremlin's approach to wars and armed conflicts is based on skillful manipulation of language. An invasion is referred to as an 'anti-terrorist operation' (Second Chechen War), a 'peace enforcement operation' (Georgia 2008), or a 'special military operation' (Ukraine 2022).<sup>5</sup>

The primary purpose of this paper is to identify dominant tendencies in V. Putin Russia's official discourse<sup>6</sup> concerning the Russo-Ukrainian war<sup>7</sup> (war discourse<sup>8</sup>). By uncovering these discursive

<sup>3</sup> Levada Center's poll conducted between 24–30 March 2022 showed that 83% of Russians support Putin. The support for the president rose by more than 10% compared to January (69%) or February (71%) 2022. In August 2024, the approval rate of the Russian president reached 85%. *Putin's approval rating*, <https://www.levada.ru/en/> (access: 4 August 2024); *Одобрение институтов, рейтинги партий и политиков* [Odobrenie institutov, reitingi partii i politikov], <https://www.levada.ru/2022/03/30/odobrenie-institutov-rejtingi-partij-i-politikov/> (access: 5 August 2024).

<sup>4</sup> According to a poll conducted in November 2023 by Levada Center, 74% of Russians support military actions in Ukraine, *Конфликт с Украиной: оценки Ноября 2023 года* [Konflikt s Ukrainoi: ocenki Noiabria 2023 goda], <https://www.levada.ru/2023/12/08/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-otsenki-noyabrya-2023-goda/> (access: 5 August 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Joanna Darczewska, *Zawładnąć umysłami i urządzić świat. Rosyjska strategia dywersji i dezinformacji* (Warszawa: Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I follow N. Fairclough's understanding of 'discourse' as a complex concept involving both language and social practice. According to Fairclough, discourse encompasses not only language but also the social contexts in which it is employed. He views discourse as a way of understanding how language constructs and is constructed by social realities, ideologies, and power relations, Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London and New York: Longman, 1995); idem, *Language and Power* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> For more on the Russo-Ukrainian war, see, among others: Taras Kuzio, 'Russian Stereotypes and Myths of Ukraine and Ukrainians and Why Novorossiia Failed', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 52: 4, 2019, pp. 297–309; idem, 'Historical Preparation and Ideological Legitimation of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: A Critical Discourse', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 32: 3, 2024, pp. 850–869, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2024.2310026>; Daniel Damian Kasprzycki, *Rosyjska wizja wojny przyszłości* (Polonia: Wydawnictwo iforteditions, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> War discourse involves the use of language and social interaction to mediate armed political conflicts. Key elements include, among others: call-to-arms rhetoric, the

patterns, the study contributes to broader discussions on post-imperial knowledge production, emphasizing the need to dismantle its lingering influence. highlighting the necessity of addressing its ongoing influence. The contemporary Russian historical narrative can therefore be seen as a continuation of Tsarist imperial ideology and colonial thinking.<sup>9</sup> The main research method used in this paper is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which examines texts within specific social contexts, particularly in relation to power, social inequalities, and domination.<sup>10</sup> However, I do not use this method comprehensively, but rather employ only the elements necessary for analysis, elaborating on existing studies that perfectly align with the spectrum of this paper. I used research conducted by the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) at the Atlantic Council, an American international affairs think tank, which identified recurring pro-Kremlin narratives<sup>11</sup> during two specific periods: the period between the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and December 2021, and the seventy days leading up to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine (16 December 2021–24 February 2022).<sup>12</sup> The methodology employed by DFRLab focused primarily on analyzing the content of 14 pro-Kremlin media outlets, including *Izvestiia*, *RIA Novosti*, *TASS*, and *Interfax*. The data was collected and examined using the Event Registry tool. These outlets form a core part of the Kremlin’s so-called ‘disinformation ecosystem’—a network of media organizations that either receive official support or operate under direct state control. The Russian government reinforces this ecosystem by influencing platforms like the Yandex search engine to prioritize and promote

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construction of an out-group enemy, and the use of language to legitimize war actions as appropriate and justifiable. Adam Hodges, ed., *Discourses of War and Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> See more: Andrzej Nowak, *Od imperium do imperium: Spojrzenia na historię Europy Wschodniej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Arcana, 2004); idem, *Putin. Źródła imperialnej agresji* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> I follow Fairclough’s concept of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which involves: (a) the analysis of text, (b) the analysis of the processes of text production, consumption, distribution, and (c) the sociocultural analysis of the discursive event (whether it be an interview, a scientific paper, or a conversation) as a whole. N. Fairclough, *Critical discourse analysis...*, p. 23; see also: Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, in Teun A. van Dijk, ed., *Discourse as Social Interaction* (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 258–84; Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Sage, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> A ‘narrative’ is a component of discourse used to organize and present information in a coherent and meaningful way. Narratives structure and represent experiences and events through specific storylines and interpretative frameworks. Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> *Narrative Warfare. How the Kremlin and Russian News Outlets Justified a War of Aggression against Ukraine*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/narrative-warfare/> (access: 31 July 2024).

these narratives as dominant. In this context, we can therefore of an official Russian war discourse.<sup>13</sup> I analyzed the narratives identified by DFRLab in order to (a) identify the discursive strategies employed by the Russian authorities and (b) extract the common topoi present within them. After analyzing the gathered materials, the next step was to reflect on additional questions: Can a common discourse be identified between World War II and the Russo-Ukrainian War? What topoi emerge in official Russian narratives concerning these two conflicts? Are they analogous, or do they differ? What arguments and reasoning patterns do Russian authorities use to justify or deny the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war? Can any parallels be drawn with Russia's denial of Soviet involvement in starting World War II?

In the Russian official discourse concerning the Russo-Ukrainian war, three prominent discursive strategies<sup>14</sup> can be identified: **denotation and naming (1)**, **judgment (2)**, and **argumentation (3)**. The first strategy aims to label and describe participants of social actions (e.g. the war) as 'us' vs. 'them' or 'ours' vs. 'the others'. This process is facilitated through mechanisms such as dehumanizing metaphors, metonymies and synecdoches (*pars pro toto*, *totum pro parte*). Once participants are identified and labeled, they are assigned strongly stereotypical and evaluative attributes, which clearly categorize them as either negative or positive (second discursive strategy: judgement). The third discursive strategy is argumentation, through which these positive or negative labels are justified<sup>15</sup> (a primary role of war discourse is to justify war-related actions, presenting them as acceptable, rational, and defensible<sup>16</sup>). Furthermore, recurring topoi based on emotions and myths can be

<sup>13</sup> The main, in-depth analysis focused on fourteen pro-Kremlin traditional media outlets: Izvestiia, RIA Novosti, TASS, Interfax, Sputnik, Kommersant, Rossiiskaia Gazeta, Vesti, Nezavisimaia Gazeta, Komsomolskaia Pravda, Argumenty i Fakty, Pravda, RT (Russia Today). However, the starting point for identifying narratives also involved analyzing over 9,000 cases of disinformation from: StopFake (fact-checking content from both media and social media), EUvsDisinfo, which monitors both media and social media platform activity, *Narrative Warfare*. More on the Russian propaganda machine in the media see: Katarzyna Chawryło, *Weapons of Mass Deception. Russian Television Propaganda in Wartime*, OSW Commentary, no. 443, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2022-05-06/weapons-mass-deception-russian-television-propaganda-wartime> (access: 20 April 2025).

<sup>14</sup> By discursive strategies, I refer to systematically recurring uses of language that contribute to a defined action plan aimed at achieving specific political or social objective, Ruth Wodak, *Dyskurs populistyczny: Retoryka wykluczenia a gatunki języka pisanego*, in Anna Duszak and Norman Fairclough, eds, *Krytyczna analiza dyskursu: Interdyscyplinarne podejście do komunikacji społecznej* (Krakow: Universitas, 2008), pp. 185–215 (p. 195).

<sup>15</sup> Wodak, *Dyskurs populistyczny*, p. 197.

<sup>16</sup> Hodges, ed., *Discourses of War*, p. 4.

observed within the discourse:<sup>17</sup> **the topos of good Russia and evil West (a); the topos of the Russia's exceptionalism (b); the topos of the patriotic and liberating war (c); the topos of Ukrainian Nazis (d); the topos of Ukraine as an aggressive and brutal state (e).**

## HIDDEN WAR NARRATIVES OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

In the months leading up to Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin and its media spread false and misleading narratives<sup>18</sup> to justify the attack and evade responsibility for the war.<sup>19</sup> These narratives collectively served as V. Putin's excuse for the aggression. DFRLab identified recurring pro-Kremlin narratives during two key periods: from March 2014 to December 2021, and from 16 December 2021 to 24 February 2022. According to the report, during the 2014–21 interwar period, three prominent recurring narratives were identified:

- I. 'Ukrainian army and voluntary formations are brutal';
- II. 'Ukraine became a failed state after it followed Europe';
- III. 'Ukrainians are Nazis'.

For the period representing the seventy days prior, among the primary narratives were:

- I. 'Russia is seeking peace';
- II. 'Russia has a moral obligation to do something about security in the region';
- III. 'Ukraine is aggressive';
- IV. 'the West is creating tensions in the region';
- V. 'Ukraine is a puppet of the West'.<sup>20</sup>

To create and disseminate the aforementioned narratives, the Kremlin has employed various discursive strategies and topoi. Allow

<sup>17</sup> I understand topoi as argumentative elements leading to predetermined intentional conclusions. Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 74–75; Michał Krzyżanowski, *Konstrukcja tożsamości narodowych i europejskich w polskim dyskursie politycznym po roku 1989: Analiza dyskursywno-historyczna*, in Duszak and Fairclough, eds, *Krytyczna analiza dyskursu*, pp. 267–305 (pp. 283–284).

<sup>18</sup> According to Meduza, an independent Russian media outlet in exile, the Russian search engine Yandex prioritizes news content from fourteen specific outlets for Russian consumers, including Izvestiia, RIA Novosti, TASS, Interfax, Rossiiskaia Gazeta, Kommersant, Vedomosti, RBC, Gazeta.ru, RT, Lenta, Regnum, Nezavisimaia Gazeta, and Vzgliad; *Мы замучились бороться. Как российское вторжение в Украину раскололо «Яндекс». Расследование Светланы Рейтер* [My zamuchilis' borot'sia. Kak rossiiskoe vtorzhenie v Ukrainu raskololo «Jandeks». Rassledovanie Svetlany Reiter], <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/05/05/my-zamuchilis-borotsya> (access: 31 July 2024).

<sup>19</sup> It is also important to highlight the revival of the Novorossia concept in 2022. Darczewska, *Zawładnąć umysłami*, p. 81.

<sup>20</sup> *Narrative Warfare*.

me to summarize the most frequently occurring ones. Russia's propaganda depicts the Ukrainian army and volunteer formations as brutal units and Ukraine as an aggressive state, emphasizing that Ukrainians prefer war over peace despite opportunities for negotiation **(2) (e)**. This narrative clearly portrays Ukraine and the West as obstacles to achieving peace. Furthermore, Ukraine is also depicted as a NATO proxy, engaged in a war with Russia on NATO's behalf, deflecting blame onto the 'evil' West.<sup>21</sup> Russian narrative exploits the topic of NATO's involvement to exaggerate Russian capabilities, focusing on reports of destroyed Western military equipment<sup>22</sup> **(1) (a)**. The Alliance's expansion strategy is also portrayed as an effort to divide Ukrainians and Russians, forcing Russia to invade Ukraine to protect its borders **(3) (c)**. The rivalry with NATO and the 'evil West' has become a key argument in the Kremlin's domestic and foreign policy. As Russia seeks to expand its sphere of influence by constructing a Russo-centric civilizational pole (the concept of the 'Russian world')<sup>23</sup> at the expense of countries like Ukraine,<sup>24</sup> whose right to sovereignty it denies, it portrays these actions as a defensive measure to protect its own sovereignty and as a response to Western initiatives. Furthermore, according to Russian narrative, Ukraine is not only a NATO proxy, but also a state allying with the colonialist US and Europe, opposing Russia which positions itself as the anti-colonialist successor of the USSR. Thus, the Russo-Ukrainian war is framed as a struggle between good and evil, with Ukraine fighting on the side of evil<sup>25</sup> **(1) (a)**. The Kremlin's tactic involves also

<sup>21</sup> Valerii Pekar and Vladyslav Rashkovan, *Seven Favourite Hidden Narratives of Russian Propaganda*, 29 July 2024, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2024/07/29/seven-favourite-hidden-narratives-of-russian-propaganda/> (access: 31 July 2024).

<sup>22</sup> Больше не «неубиваемый»: на Украине уничтожен первый британский Challenger 2 [Bol'she ne «neubivaemyi»: na Ukraine unichtozhen pervyi britanskii Challenger 2], <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/202395203-1qvDx.html> (access: 6 August 2024).

<sup>23</sup> The term 'Russian world' (*russkij mir*) refers to the national-cultural and historical-political identification including shared language, culture, religion (Orthodoxy), history, and emphasizing positive aspects of the Soviet era. Russia's aggression against Ukraine aligns with this notion, asserting a 'right' to armed humanitarian intervention to protect the *russkij mir*. Andrzej Wierzbicki, *Russkij mir jako projekt restauracyjny imperium*, in Stanisław Bielen and Andrzej Skrzypek, eds., *Rosja. Rozważania imperiologiczne* (Warsaw: Aspra, 2015), pp. 101–36.

<sup>24</sup> More about the concept of *russkij mir* as an instrument of Russia's neo-imperial policy toward Ukraine: Marek Delong, 'Ruski mir jako narzędzie rosyjskiej ekspansji geopolitycznej na terytorium Ukrainy', *Przegląd Geopolityczny* 33, 2020, pp. 50–64.

<sup>25</sup> This tactic is especially spread in postcolonial countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where the legacy of colonialism continues to play a major role in shaping historical memory. *Deepening the Response to Authoritarian Information Operations in Latin America*, <https://www.ned.org/deepening-the-response-to-authoritarian-information-operations-in-latin-america/> (access: 2 August 2024); Pekar and Rashkovan, *Seven favourite hidden*.

underscoring that Ukraine cannot defeat Russia due to its limited resources: V. Putin's state, being geographically vast and possessing nuclear weapons, never loses wars and will ultimately prevail<sup>26</sup> **(2) (b)**. The Russian manipulation tactic also involves claiming that Russia is not responsible for civilian casualties (such as denying the Bucha massacre<sup>27</sup> and spreading disinformation about Russian missiles striking a children's hospital in Kyiv in August 2024<sup>28</sup>) and that Ukraine is filled with 'Nazis', who use civilians as human shields and plan a genocide of Russians. Consequently, the war with Ukraine is presented as a war against Nazism **(1) (d)**. Moreover, after Russia invaded Ukraine, the term 'Ukrainian Nazis' began to be used on a much larger scale in Russian propaganda. Data collected from over 8,000 Russian websites since 2014 reveal that references to Nazism remained relatively low for eight years but surged to unprecedented levels following Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>29</sup>

In the informational warfare against Ukraine, Russia employed various methods, including:

- inauthentic social media accounts and fake Ukrainian media pages;
- websites impersonating established news organisations (e.g. Le Monde, The Guardian, Ansa, Der Spiegel, and Fox News);
- websites impersonating public authorities and international organisations (e.g. French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, NATO).<sup>30</sup> Since February 2022, NATO countries supporting Ukraine have been

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.; *Russia Takes Next Step in Domestic Internet Surveillance*, <https://dfirlab.org/2023/02/17/russia-takes-next-step-in-domestic-internet-surveillance/> (access: 2 August 2024).

<sup>27</sup> Cases of disinformation on Bucha: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=bucha> (access: 6 August 2024); *The Bucha Massacre: Mapping a Year of Kremlin Denial*, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-bucha-massacre-mapping-a-year-of-kremlin-denial/> (access: 6 August 2024).

<sup>28</sup> The Kremlin claimed that the bloodied individuals in the Okhmatdyt hospital were actors. Similar disinformation tactics include assertions that the children's hospital in Kyiv was hit by an American Patriot missile or fragments of Western air-defense missiles, that it was a NATO false flag operation, or that it was caused by a Ukrainian air defense missile, *Russia hits Kyiv Children's Hospital, Casualties Reported*, <https://kyivindependent.com/russian-missile-attack-hits-okhmatdyt-children-hospital-casualties-reported/> (access: 6 August 2024); *DISINFO: The Bloodied People in the Okhmatdyt Hospital Were Played by Actors*, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-bloodied-people-in-the-okhmatdyt-hospital-were-played-by-actors/> (access: 6 August 2024).

<sup>29</sup> *How the Russian Media Spread False Claims About Ukrainian Nazis*, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/07/02/world/europe/ukraine-nazis-russia-media.html> (access: 12 August 2024).

<sup>30</sup> *France Accuses Russians of Impersonating French Government and Media to Spread Disinformation*, <https://therecord.media/france-accuses-russians-of-impersonating-french-government-media-misinformation> (access: 5 August 2024).

primary targets for Russian cyberattacks. A Microsoft Digital Defense Report (October 2023) states that 36 percent of identified Russian hostile actions targeted NATO member states, particularly the United States (21 percent), Poland (10 percent) and United Kingdom (9 percent), focusing on government organizations (27 percent), think tanks/NGOs (21 percent), education (11 percent), IT (9 percent) and intergovernmental organizations (9 percent);<sup>31</sup>

- hacking, credential theft, phishing, and forging documents;
- spreading rumors.

The aggression against Ukraine has demonstrated that Russian cyberattacks play a crucial role in its military strategies,<sup>32</sup> aiming to discredit Ukraine both domestically and internationally.<sup>33</sup> Externally, the Kremlin tailors its war narratives mainly via RT and Sputnik,<sup>34</sup> especially in Latin America and Africa,<sup>35</sup> while internally, it focuses on controlling domestic audiences by restricting access to information.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Anna Maria Dyner, *Russia Continuing Cyberthreats Against NATO Countries*, <https://pism.pl/publications/russia-continuing-cyberthreats-against-nato-countries> (access: 5. August 2024); *Microsoft Digital Defense Report. Building and Improving Cyber Resilience*, Microsoft Threat Intelligence 2023, p. 55.

<sup>32</sup> Disinformation and cyberattacks against Ukraine are not new in Russian strategy, see e.g. D. Zolotukhin, „Biała księga” specjalnych operacji informacyjnych wobec Ukrainy w latach 2014–2018’, *Biuletyn 'Monitoringu Propagandy i Dezinformacji'* 1, 2020, pp. 6–10. „Biała księga” was developed within the StopFake project, which unites experts and social activists focused on identifying and exposing Russian propaganda falsifications.

<sup>33</sup> Example of Russian influence operations in the West is ‘Doppelganger’ which has been taking place since 2022 targeting the United States and its allies, including European countries such as France, Germany, and Poland. Katarzyna Chawryło, ‘Doppelganger’: the pattern of Russia’s anti-Western influence operation, *OSW Analyses*, OSW Analyses, 13 Sept. 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-09-13/doppelganger-pattern-russias-anti-western-influence-operation> (access: 20 Sept. 2024).

<sup>34</sup> In February 2022, the EU banned RT and Sputnik from operating in its 27 member countries. In February, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok made RT and Sputnik’s social media content unavailable to users in the EU. Microsoft removed RT and Sputnik from MSN, the Microsoft Store, and the Microsoft Advertising network. In March YouTube banned access to all RT and Sputnik channels on its platform in Europe, including Britain. Apple removed RT and Sputnik from its App Store in all countries except Russia. *Facebook Owner Meta Will Block Access to Russia’s RT, Sputnik in EU*, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/facebook-owner-meta-will-block-access-russias-rt-sputnik-eu-2022-02-28/> (access: 2. August 2024); *Apple on Russian Invasion of Ukraine: All Product Sales Paused, RT and Sputnik News Apps Pulled*, <https://9to5mac.com/2022/03/01/apple-ukraine-statement-pause-product-sales/> (access: 2 August 2024); *Digital Technology and the War in Ukraine*, <https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2022/02/28/ukraine-russia-digital-war-cyberattacks/> (access: 2 August 2024).

<sup>35</sup> *Report Undermining Ukraine: How Russia Widened Its Global Information War in 2023*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/undermining-ukraine-how-russia-widened-its-global-information-war-in-2023/> (access: 2 August 2024).

<sup>36</sup> In 2022, the budget for state media increased tenfold compared to 2002, reaching 115 billion rubles (equivalent to \$1.5 billion). This was tied to influence operations in Ukraine and later to justifying the full-scale military aggression. From January to March 2022, media spending tripled compared to the first quarter of 2021. Darczewska, *Zawładnąć umysłami*.



In other words, cyberspace is for Russia a key domain for conducting effective offensive operations within its broader hybrid warfare<sup>37</sup> strategy.<sup>38</sup> The internet, or more specifically RuNet, is viewed by the Kremlin as an extension of its own territory and a part of the Russian mental space. Its 'extraterritorial' nature, in turn, allows the Russian discourse to extend its influence over Russian-speaking audiences living outside the country's borders.<sup>39</sup>

Russian propaganda in Ukraine aimed to weaken resistance by portraying the country as an unreliable ally, amplifying internal conflicts, and targeting civil society with phishing. In 2023, Russian war discourse expanded from targeting President Volodymyr Zelensky (early tactics included deepfake videos falsely showing Zelenskyy fleeing the country and urging Ukrainian troops to surrender<sup>40</sup>) to other Ukrainian officials and military leaders. For instance, Russian propaganda employed thousands of fake accounts on TikTok to spread rumors about Ukrainian political corruption.<sup>41</sup> In July 2023, TikTok was used to disseminate corruption allegations against Oleksii Reznikov, the former Ukrainian defense minister, accusing him of buying luxury items such as cars and mansions, suggesting he and the Ukrainian government were profiting from the war. TikTok identified this as their largest-ever information operation, removing over 12,800 accounts that had attracted 847,000 subscribers and potentially generated hundreds of millions of views.<sup>42</sup> Other similar operations also gained traction. For example, a false narrative about Ukrainian First Lady Olena Zelenska buying luxury jewelry in the

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<sup>37</sup> Hybrid warfare combines full-scale military aggression with actions in the areas of media, culture, and the economy. This type of warfare is evident in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war and extends beyond 'disinformation,' 'cyberattacks,' 'propaganda,' or 'psychological warfare'. Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Russia's cyber activities are managed by the Intelligence Board of the Russian General Staff (GU), the Information Technology Forces, the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Foreign Intelligence Service. While officially tasked with protecting critical infrastructure, they primarily conduct cyberspace operations targeting Ukraine and NATO. Dyner, *Russia Continuing Cyberthreats*.

<sup>39</sup> See more: Darczewska, *Zawładnąć umysłami*; Agnieszka Legucka, *The Future of Russia's Sovereign Internet*, PISM, 2021, [https://pism.pl/publications/The\\_Future\\_of\\_Russias\\_Sovereign\\_Internet](https://pism.pl/publications/The_Future_of_Russias_Sovereign_Internet) (access: 17 September 2024).

<sup>40</sup> *Deepfake Video of Zelenskyy Could Be 'Tip of the Iceberg' in Info War, Experts Warn*, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/16/1087062648/deepfake-video-zelenskyy-experts-war-manipulation-ukraine-russia> (access: 8 August 2024).

<sup>41</sup> *Russia Takes Next Step in Domestic; Ukraine War: How TikTok Fakes Pushed Russian Lies to Millions*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67687449> (access: 2 August 2024).

<sup>42</sup> *Massive Russian Influence Operation Targeted Former Ukrainian Defense Minister on TikTok*, <https://dfrlab.org/2023/12/14/massive-russian-influence-operation-targeted-former-ukrainian-defense-minister-on-tiktok/> (access: 4 August 2024).

US went viral on X.<sup>43</sup> The Kremlin also propagated the narrative that Western weapons donated to Ukraine were being sold on the ‘black market’ or given to Russians. Furthermore, Russian propaganda’s claims that Ukraine supplied weapons to Hamas for the October 2023, attack on Israel, using screenshots of ammunition to support this allegation.<sup>44</sup> In February 2024, Russian hackers targeted several popular Ukrainian media outlets, including *Ukrainska Pravda*, to post fake news about the war, spreading false reports claiming that Russia had destroyed a unit of Ukrainian special forces in Avdiivka.<sup>45</sup>

According to the aforementioned Microsoft Digital Defense Report, nearly 50 percent of destructive Russian attacks against Ukrainian networks occurred in the first six weeks of the war.<sup>46</sup> In 2023 Russian state actors<sup>47</sup> including Midnight Blizzard,<sup>48</sup> Star Blizzard,<sup>49</sup> and Aqua Blizzard<sup>50</sup> launched phishing campaigns posing as Western diplomats and Ukrainian officials to gain access to accounts that might contain insights into Western foreign policy on Ukraine, defense plans and intentions, or war crimes investigations.<sup>51</sup>

## WORLD WAR II AND RUSSO–UKRAINE NARRATIVES: ANALOGIES

The official Russia’s discourse on the Russo–Ukrainian war provided Putin with a pretext for invading Ukraine, mirroring the approach used

<sup>43</sup> *Did Ukraine’s First Lady Spend \$1.1M on Cartier Jewelry During September 2023 NYC Trip?*, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/olena-zelenska-cartier-jewelry/> (access: 4 August 2024); *In Ukraine, Russia Tries to Discredit Leaders and Amplify Internal Divisions*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/in-ukraine-russia-tries-to-discredit-leaders-and-amplify-internal-divisions/> (access: 4 August 2024).

<sup>44</sup> *Russia Takes Next Step in Domestic; No, This Video Does not Show Ukrainian Arms Deliveries to Hamas*, <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/truth-or-fake/20231013-no-this-video-does-not-show-ukrainian-arms-deliveries-to-hamas> (access: 4 August 2024).

<sup>45</sup> *Several Ukrainian Media Outlets Attacked by Russian Hackers*, <https://therecord.media/ukrainian-news-outlets-attacked-by-russian-hackers> (access: 4 August 2024).

<sup>46</sup> *Microsoft Digital Defense Report*, p. 48.

<sup>47</sup> More about the Microsoft naming taxonomy for threat actors: *How Microsoft Names Threat Actors*, <https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/defender-xdr/microsoft-threat-actor-naming> (access: 8 August 2024).

<sup>48</sup> *Nation State Actors Midnight Blizzard*, <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/security/security-insider/midnight-blizzard> (access: 8 August 2024).

<sup>49</sup> *Star Blizzard Increases Sophistication and Evasion in Ongoing Attacks*, <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/security/blog/2023/12/07/star-blizzard-increases-sophistication-and-evasion-in-ongoing-attacks/> (access: 8 August 2024).

<sup>50</sup> *Nation State Actor Aqua Blizzard*, <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/security/security-insider/aqua-blizzard> (access: 8 August 2024).

<sup>51</sup> *Microsoft Digital Defense Report*, p. 56.

by Soviet authorities to justify the USSR's role in igniting World War II. Both narratives serve as examples of the constructed geography and history of the world. In the context of World War II, the Soviet Union's involvement is often justified by the signing of the Munich Agreement in September 1938. Russian historians frequently argue that after this agreement, the USSR faced a genuine threat of international isolation, compelling it to take necessary actions to prevent such a *scenario*. This potential isolation, coupled with the growing threat from capitalist countries, is cited as justification for the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact in August 1939—a non-aggression pact with the Third Reich, accompanied by secret protocols that divided Central Europe into spheres of influence. Furthermore, the events of 17 September 1939, when the eastern territories of the Republic of Poland, as to which the USSR used names: Western Ukraine and Western Belarus, were unlawfully incorporated into the USSR, are portrayed in the official Russian discourse as the expansion of the Soviet sphere of influence and the liberation of fraternal nations ('liberation march'). Similarly, the annexation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia is presented as the extension of the Soviet sphere of influence following the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact.<sup>52</sup>

With regard to Russia's official discourse concerning both World War II and the Russo–Ukrainian war, common topoi and tendencies can be identified at multiple levels, including:

- the 'denazification' of Ukraine, evoking the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany during World War II<sup>53</sup> **(d)**;
- emphasizing the unity, courage, heroism, and sacrifice of the Soviet/Russian people in their fight against fascists/Nazis **(b)**;
- creating the image of USSR/Russia as a superpower and identifying its enemies **(b)**;
- the glorification of a strong leader (Vladimir Putin<sup>54</sup>, Joseph Stalin), with immoral decisions justified as necessary for the state;
- army apology: presenting Soviet/Russian Army successes while erasing defeats **(b)**;

<sup>52</sup> See more: Dagmara Moskwa, *MATKA OJCZYŻNA WZYWA! Wielka wojna ojczyźniana w edukacji i polityce historycznej putinowskiej Rosji* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo ISP PAN, 2020).

<sup>53</sup> Legucka, *Russia's Wartime Censorship*.

<sup>54</sup> Russian authorities also create the myth of Putin, who 'raised Russia from its knees' and is now 'saving the world'. Тубхат Загуралова, *Путин сегодня спасает человечество*, Республиканское информационное агентство «Дагестан» [Tubkhat Zaguralova, *Putin segodnia spasaet chelovechestvo*, Respublikanskoe informatsionnoe agentstvo «Dagestan»], [https://riadagestan.ru/news/society/putin\\_segodnya\\_spasaet\\_chelovechestvo/](https://riadagestan.ru/news/society/putin_segodnya_spasaet_chelovechestvo/) (access: 15 September 2024).

- framing the war as a patriotic and liberating, aimed at defending the Soviet/Russian people and eliminating fascism/Nazism **(c)**;
- primarily relying on emotional language and portraying the USSR, Stalin, and the Red Army, as well as Putin, the Russian Army, and Russia, in a positive light **(b)**;
- creating the image of a clearly defined enemy (Nazi Germany/NATO), depicted as an invader, occupier, and plunderer **(a)**;
- portraying NATO's involvement in the war as an unsuccessful attempt to divide Ukrainians and Russians, similar to Nazi Germany's failed efforts to divide the Soviet people **(a)**.

Analogies between Russia's official narrative about the Russo-Ukrainian war and World War II have been reinforced by legal acts enacted since 2014.<sup>55</sup> In May 2014, Putin signed a law against the rehabilitation of Nazism (Article 354.1 CC, the Federal Law no. 128-FZ)<sup>56</sup> introducing criminal liability for 'infringement on historical memory regarding the events of the Second World War.' Violations can result in fines or up to five years of forced labor or imprisonment.<sup>57</sup> The new law, often referred to as the Yarovaya Law after the United Russia deputy who coordinated the work on its preparation, was strategically timed to coincide with Victory Day on 9 May, when the myth of the Great Patriotic War (GPW) gains particular importance.<sup>58</sup>

The legislation's authors cited the situation in Ukraine as the *rationale* for its introduction, arguing that ideologization and historical revisionism there had led to the resurgence of fascism.<sup>59</sup> While the law includes a legal ban on Holocaust denial, in practice, it primarily serves to shield the USSR from accusations of instigating the war,

<sup>55</sup> I understand the term 'memory laws' here, following N. Koposow, as 'laws regulating historical memory,' or simply 'laws on memory.' Nicolay Koposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> Федеральный закон от 5 мая 2014 г. N 128-ФЗ О внесении изменений в отдельные законодательные акты Российской Федерации [Federal'nyi zakon ot 5 maja 2014 g. N 128-FZ O vnesenii izmenenii v otdel'nye zakonodatel'nye akty Rossiiskoj Federatsii], <https://base.garant.ru/70648878/> (access: 1 August 2024).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Modern Russia politics of history is centered on rehabilitating and glorifying the USSR's great power policy, especially under Stalin, and the myth of GPW (years 1939–1941, particularly 1939, are largely neglected by the authorities). Moreover, for Russians, the first phase of the World War II (from 1939 to 1941) was a regional European conflict which did not directly impact the USSR. Dagmara Moskwa, "The Community is Everything, The Individual is Nothing". The Second World War in Russian History Education,' *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society* 13: 1, 2021, pp. 82–106.

<sup>59</sup> Katarzyna Laskowska, 'Rehabilitation of Nazism as a Crime in the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation', *Ius Novum* 17: 1, 2023, pp. 1–23 (p. 18).

committing war crimes, and occupying Eastern Europe.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, in March 2022, amendments to the Administrative Offences Code (AOC) and Criminal Code (CC), known as the 'wartime censorship law,' were implemented, imposing punishments for spreading 'false information' about the Russian Army, discrediting the army, and calling for sanctions against the Russian Federation.<sup>61</sup> As a result of the 'wartime censorship law,' state media are also prohibited from using terms like 'war' or 'invasion,' and must instead refer to the conflict as a 'military operation.' The 'wartime censorship law' was amended in 2023 (federal laws No. 57-FZ<sup>62</sup> and No. 58-FZ<sup>63</sup>) extending punishments for discrediting or spreading unreliable information to volunteers and organizations assisting the armed forces, including groups like Wagner Group and increased maximum prison terms up to seven years (priorly five) for discrediting Russia's Armed Forces and up to five years (priorly three) for spreading false information about the Russian Army.

Since the Yarovaya Law was enacted, a few cases have been recorded each year. The first conviction occurred in 2016 when V. Luzgin, a teacher from Perm, was fined 200,000 rubles. He had posted on social media, claiming that 'the Communists and Germans invaded Poland together on 1 September 1939, starting World War II,' and that 'Communism and Nazism collaborated closely.' The court deemed his statements as rehabilitating Nazism and revising

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<sup>60</sup> Nicolay Koposow, 'Ustawy memorialne w Rosji i na Ukrainie: Krzyżujące się historie', *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, 2: 13, 2015, pp. 167–216 (pp. 182–184).

<sup>61</sup> Федеральный закон от 4 марта 2022 г. N 31-ФЗ О внесении изменений в Кодекс Российской Федерации об административных правонарушениях (с изменениями и дополнениями) [Federal'nyi zakon ot 4 marta 2022 g. N 31-FZ O vnesenii izmenenii v Kodeks Rossiiskoi Federatsii ob administrativnykh pravonarusheniakh (s izmeneniiami i dopolnениями)], <https://base.garant.ru/403609304/> (access: 1 August 2024); Федеральный закон от 4 марта 2022 г. N 32-ФЗ О внесении изменений в Уголовный кодекс Российской Федерации и статьи 31 и 151 Уголовно-процессуального кодекса Российской Федерации [Federal'nyi zakon ot 4 marta 2022 g. N 32-FZ O vnesenii izmenenii v Ugolovnyi kodeks Rossiiskoi Federatsii i stat'i 31 i 151 Ugolovno-protsessual'nogo kodeksa Rossiiskoi Federatsii] <https://base.garant.ru/403609306/> (access: 1 August 2024).

<sup>62</sup> Федеральный закон О внесении изменений в статьи 13.15 и 20.3.3 Кодекса Российской Федерации об административных правонарушениях от 18.03.2023 N 57-ФЗ (последняя редакция) [Federal'nyi zakon O vnesenii izmenenii v stat'i 13.15 i 20.3.3 Kodeksa Rossiiskoi Federatsii ob administrativnykh pravonarusheniakh ot 18.03.2023 N 57-FZ (posledniaia redaktsiia)], [https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_442342/](https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_442342/) (access: 11 August 2024).

<sup>63</sup> Федеральный закон О внесении изменений в Уголовный кодекс Российской Федерации от 18.03.2023 N 58-ФЗ (последняя редакция), [Federal'nyi zakon O vnesenii izmenenii v Ugolovnyi kodeks Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 18.03.2023 N 58-FZ (posledniaia redaktsiia)], [https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_442341/](https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_442341/) (access: 11 August 2024).

the outcomes of World War II and the Nuremberg Tribunal.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, since the February 2022, Russian authorities have initiated at least 259 criminal cases for disseminating ‘fake news’ about the war, according to the independent rights organization OVD-Info (as of January 2024).<sup>65</sup> Individuals who question the war or show sympathy for Ukraine, even in private forms like homemade signs or graffiti, risk prosecution, often based on social media posts or messages.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, due to ‘wartime censorship law,’ some Russian media, including Dozhd, Novaia Gazeta, and the Moscow radio station Echo, have suspended operations. The Russian government also has blocked several Western news sources, such as the BBC, Meduza, and Deutsche Welle,<sup>67</sup> as well as social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, labeling them as ‘extremist.’ TikTok also has started censoring content related to the Russo-Ukrainian war.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, in 2023, Roskomnadzor launched Oculus, an internet monitoring system designed to identify content considered undesirable by the Kremlin.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Алексей Обухов, *Российский суд запретил рассказывать о сотрудничестве СССР и нацистской Германии, „Московский комсомолец“* [Aleksei Obukhov, *Rossiiskii sud zapretil rasskazyvat' o sotrudnichestve SSSR i nacistskoj Germanii, 'Moskovskii komсомолец'*], <https://www.mk.ru/social/2016/07/01/rossiyskiy-sud-zapretil-rasskazyvat-o-sotrudnichestve-sssr-i-nacistskoj-germanii.html> (access: 2 August 2024).

<sup>65</sup> *Persecution of the Anti-War Movement Report, January 2024*, [https://en.ovdinfo.org/persecution-anti-war-movement-report-january-2024?\\_gl=1\\*96ajsb\\*\\_ga\\*NTA4ODg0NDQzLjE3MTYwOTk0OTA.\\*\\_ga\\_J7DH9NKJ0R\\*MTcxNjM4NzY3MS4zLjEuMTcxNjM4Nzc4Ni42MC4wLjA.#1](https://en.ovdinfo.org/persecution-anti-war-movement-report-january-2024?_gl=1*96ajsb*_ga*NTA4ODg0NDQzLjE3MTYwOTk0OTA.*_ga_J7DH9NKJ0R*MTcxNjM4NzY3MS4zLjEuMTcxNjM4Nzc4Ni42MC4wLjA.#1) (access: 1 August 2024).

<sup>66</sup> The New York Times analyzed 6,771 cases under new wartime censorship law from the 4 March 2022, to the end of August 2023, *How the Russian Government Silences Wartime Dissent*, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/12/29/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-censorship.html> (access: 3 August 2024).

<sup>67</sup> *Russia Outlaws Spreading 'Fake News' about the Russian Military with Fines and Prison*, <https://www.poynter.org/business-work/2022/russia-outlaws-spreading-fake-news-about-the-russian-military-with-fines-and-prison/> (access: 4 August 2024).

<sup>68</sup> In March 2022, the media control agency Roskomnadzor blocked Instagram and Facebook in a response to Meta's decision to allow posts calling for violence against Russian troops. The Prosecutor General's Office of the Russian Federation filed a motion to a court to recognize Meta Platforms as an extremist organization. YouTube, Telegram, and Russia's own Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki remain active but must provide user data to the authorities. Katarzyna Chawrylo, *The Kremlin's Crackdown on Western Social Networks*, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2022-03-15/kremlins-crackdown-western-social-networks> (access: 4 August 2024); *Russia Blocks Access to Facebook and Twitter*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/04/russia-completely-blocks-access-to-facebook-and-twitter> (access: 4 August 2024); *Russia Bans Facebook and Instagram under 'Extremism' Law*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/21/russia-bans-facebook-and-instagram-under-extremism-law> [access: 4 August 2024]; Legucka, *Russia's Wartime Censorship*; Chawrylo, *The Kremlin's crackdown*.

<sup>69</sup> *Russia Takes Next Step in Domestic*.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In Putin's authoritarian regime,<sup>70</sup> where certain memories are prioritized for commemoration over others, the Russo-Ukrainian war has significant potential to evolve into a new myth for Russian society. Contributing to this is Russia's official discourse surrounding the ongoing conflict, which is rooted in disinformation and historical revisionism, often highly ideological and focused on discrediting opponents through fabricated or misleading materials. Moreover, Russian war discourse is ideologically invested, as it helps reinforce and sustain the regime by (a) drawing parallels to the Great Patriotic War and depicting NATO as an existential threat, (b) framing the Russo-Ukrainian war as a necessary preemptive effort to defend Russian society, culture, and values, and (c) leading to harsh repressive measures such as constant surveillance, self-censorship, and denunciation.

In response, numerous initiatives—such as Texty,<sup>71</sup> The Reckoning Project,<sup>72</sup> East Stratcom Taskforce,<sup>73</sup> the Atlantic Council's 'Narrative Warfare'<sup>74</sup> and 'Undermining Ukraine',<sup>75</sup> as well as EUvsDisinfo<sup>76</sup> have been launched to debunk false Russian war narratives. These efforts may help document how Putin's regime initiated and conducted the war. While disinformation and cyberattacks may not violate international law, the messages they convey could serve as evidence of crimes, including the crime of aggression. To put it differently, analyzing recurring war narratives can offer valuable insights into Russia's planned military actions.

I suggest that Putin's Russia can be defined as a 'memory authoritarian regime'<sup>77</sup> uniquely using memory on a global scale for

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<sup>70</sup> See also: Timothy Snyder, *Droga do niewolności* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Znak Horyzont, 2019).

<sup>71</sup> Texty, <https://texty.org.ua/tag/eng/> (access: 6. August 2024).

<sup>72</sup> The Reckoning Project, <https://www.thereckoningproject.com/> (access: 6 August 2024).

<sup>73</sup> East Stratcom Taskforce, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/ukraine/> (access: 6 August 2024).

<sup>74</sup> Narrative Warfare, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/narrative-warfare/> (access: 6 August 2024).

<sup>75</sup> Undermining Ukraine, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/undermining-ukraine/> (access: 6 August 2024).

<sup>76</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/pl/> (access: 6 August 2024).

<sup>77</sup> On memory regimes see: Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard, 'A Theory of the Politics of Memory', in idem and Jan Kubik, eds, *Twenty Years after Communism. The Politics of Memory and Commemoration* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 7–34, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199375134.003.0002>; Eric Langenbacher, 'Changing Memory Regimes in Contemporary Germany?', *German Politics and Society* 21:

legitimization. The analogies between the discourse on the Russo–Ukrainian war and World War II as highlighted in this paper serve as clear examples of this approach.

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2, 2003, pp. 46–68; idem, 'Twenty-First Century Memory Regimes in Germany and Poland: An Analysis of Elite Discourses and Public Opinion', *German Politics and Society* 26: 4, 2008, pp. 50–81.



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